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ABSTRACT

Attitudes about farming and government agricultural policies differed among residential categories ranging from urban to rural. A mail survey gathered 3,232 completed questionnaires from a national random sample of 9,250 households. Statistical weighting made respondent categories representative of national proportions. Although respondents exhibited widespread agreement with the primacy of agriculture, farmers were most likely to agree and urban residents were least likely to agree that: (1) agriculture is the basic occupation of our society; (2) farming is a very satisfying occupation; (3) agricultural depression causes national depression; and (4) most food profits go to middlemen rather than farmers. Respondents were largely supportive of the concept of the family farm, but urban residents were less likely to support the preservation of the family farm if that meant higher food prices than were suburban, rural nonfarm, and farm residents. Few respondents were satisfied with the record of government intervention in the farm sector. However, items pertaining to government involvement in agriculture elicited high rates of "undecided" responses, and showed little divergence among residential categories. This report includes 7 data tables and 19 references. (SV)

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Urban and Suburban Residents' Perceptions of Farmers and Agriculture

Joseph J. Molnar and Patricia A. Duffy

Although farmers now comprise less than three percent of the population, agriculture remains a salient part of the national awareness. There are several explanations for the widespread interest in agriculture. First, although the number of farms has declined, average farm size and yields have both increased significantly, so that agriculture remains a major sector of the national economy. More important perhaps in explaining the general interest in agriculture in a largely urban society is the persistence of the "agrarian ideal." Some argue that the persistence of agricultural values can be explained partly by an inertia that keeps the basic values of a formerly agrarian culture from yielding to change (*16*). Political power and representation also respond slowly to the changing population, as can be seen in the continued high level of government expenditure for agricultural programs.

Although these farm programs, including many special subsidies and tax benefits, continue to be supported by a majority in Congress, there are signs that the ideological framework that accorded special treatment to farmers may be changing (*5*). For example, the Reagan Administration's proposal for the 1985 farm bill involved a large reduction in the traditional benefits. Although the Reagan proposal was rejected in favor of a bill more favorable to farmers, concern over growing budget deficits has placed agricultural subsidies under ever-increasing public scrutiny. It is not well understood what values are emerging to dominate national choices about policy and expenditures in the agricultural sector, but it is likely that the sympathies and preferences of the nation's urban majority will have a grow-

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ing influence over the way farmers and agriculture will be treated in the coming decade (*13*).

Research on general rural-urban attitudinal differences has led to the conclusion that although some significant differences do exist they are relatively unimportant (*9*). Also, many of these differences may be better explained by the different occupations and educational levels of the respondents. Few studies have systematically explored attitudes about agriculture and farm policy among the general public. Because rural residents should, in general, have greater contact with and knowledge about agriculture, it would not be surprising if substantial differences in attitudes toward agriculture could be observed.

Here we examine the attitudes of urban, suburban, and rural residents toward farmers and these residents' perceptions of issues important to agriculture. Particular attention is devoted to assessing perceptions about "appropriate" farm size and structure and attitudes about government involvement in agriculture.

Agrarian Fundamentalism and Government's Role in Agriculture

Thomas Jefferson is the best known exponent of agrarian values, although agrarian sentiments can be traced back to Aristotle and Cicero (*10*). Agrarian values fueled social movements among farmers in response to economic conditions and perceived exploitation by railroads and other institutions (*7*). Agrarian values became a regional theme of life in the South (*3*) and a basis for hardy individualism in the West (*11*). Despite wide internal variations, agrarianism emphasized an appeal to unity among all farmers (*13*).

Recent research has shown strong support for agrarian principles among farmers and rural residents (*2, 8*), but agrarianism can be a source of political division in American society when it serves as a rationale for protecting the economic standing of the farmer or justifying special treatment. Opponents point out that farmers are a distinct and wealthy minority, and present day claims for special treatment or subsidy are a legacy of the past.

It is a precept of agricultural fundamentalism that there is something special about the farm way of life and that the general good of the nation can be served by keeping the agricultural sector free and strong. These sentiments can be evoked and used to the advantage of the agricultural sector in gaining support for farm policies (*16*). In shaping farm policy commercial agriculture has successfully used "protection of the family farm" as a symbolic issue. Similarly, small farm advocates seem to emphasize the moral superiority of the yeoman farmer (*17*).

Although protecting property rights was always a function of government, the idea that federal legislation should be used to provide direct assistance to the farm sector did not originate until the decade following World War I. At that time the agricultural sector was experiencing a severe decline brought about in part by the post-war decline in export demand for U.S. agricultural products and the consequent drop in farm prices.

The basic provisions of current agricultural policy have evolved over the past half century (*1*, *12*). Two important provisions are the Commodity Credit Corporation loans, which began in the 1930s, and the target price program, which evolved during the 1970s. The CCC program offers nonrecourse loans for certain commodities. The ostensible purpose of the CCC program is to stabilize prices by storing commodities when prices are low and releasing commodities when prices are high. In reality, political forces often kept the CCC loan rate sufficiently high so that large surpluses have accumulated.

Under the target price program, a "target price" for each farm program commodity is set by legislation, and producers receive the difference between market price (or the CCC loan rate if that is higher) and the target price. The direct cash subsidy of the target price provision encourages production of program commodities, which guarantees a steady supply of these commodities even when market prices are low.

The target price program was relatively inexpensive during the agricultural boom years of the 1970s, but agriculture in the 1980s is characterized by low product prices, increased financial stress, and a declining trade position for the United States. The 1985 farm bill, which was intensely debated on Capitol Hill, will be the most expensive farm bill in history. To many the target price program has begun to seem unduly expensive. With no immediate prospect for recovery in the international market, policymakers face tough choices between continued high subsidization of agriculture or allowing a painful adjustment to new global supply and demand conditions. Spending has always been a major source of controversy, but few other components of the federal budget are as sentiment-laden as the farm bill. The symbolic and real importance of agriculture to the nation creates great complexities and distortions. Every policy is shaped by perception, and perception reflects historical patterns of sentiment, belief, and values.

Data and Study Methods

Data for this study were obtained from a nationwide sample of American households contacted in a Spring 1986 mail survey. The questionnaire was

designed to assess beliefs about various issues related to the role of farming in society, the appropriate role of the U.S. government in agriculture, and the "desirable" size and structure of farms. Respondents were also asked to provide selected background characteristics and to describe their previous experience with farming.

The sample was randomly drawn from a computer-merged listing of residential telephone subscribers and automobile owners. The sample should be representative of nearly all households in the nation. (Most households with unlisted telephone numbers would be included.)

In January 1986 a questionnaire and cover letter explaining the purpose of the study were mailed to each household in the sample. One week later a reminder postcard was sent. Two weeks later a second questionnaire was mailed. The following week another reminder postcard was mailed. A third questionnaire was sent a month later, again followed by a reminder postcard (*6*). Questionnaires were mailed to 9,250 households. Completed, usable questionnaires were available from 3,232 respondents, a 46 percent completion rate when bad addresses and deaths were taken into account (*4*).

The data were weighted to allow national analysis based on a sample design that featured oversampling in selected states. Sample weights were also calculated to counter differential response by age, sex, race, and income (*15*). The weighting procedures retained the original sample size while improving the representativeness of the sample. Table 1 compares sample characteristics with U.S. census data (*18*). The sample somewhat overrepresents people with high levels of education. The sample also somewhat overrepresents both farm and large city residents and underrepresents small town and rural residents. In its distribution of age, sex, race, and income, the sample resembles the general population fairly closely.

Measurement and Analysis

Beliefs about farmers, the future of farming, and the role of government in the agricultural sector were assessed with a fixed format response framework ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to tap direction and intensity of sentiment. For a general analysis, these responses were collapsed into three categories, "agree," "undecided," and "disagree." The intensity of sentiment was used for a second analysis which tested for significant differences in response based on area of residence.

Place of residence was obtained by asking respondents to indicate the kind of place where they live now. There were six residential categories on the questionnaire: (a) large city (population over 500,000), (b) medium-sized

Table 1. Distribution of persons by selected personal and household characteristics, weighted 1986 survey results and U.S. total (24).

Characteristic	Percent		
	National Survey	U.S. Total	Difference
Sex			
Male	42.8	48.6	-5.8
Female	57.2	51.4	5.8
Race			
Black	5.8	11.7	-5.9
White	88.3	86.0	2.3
Other	5.9	2.3	3.6
Age			
34 years and younger	40.1	41.2	-1.1
35 to 64 years	38.5	43.1	-5.6
65 and older	21.4	15.7	6.7
Education			
Less than high school graduate	17.5	18.3	-.8
High school graduate	28.5	49.8	-21.3
Some college	25.7	15.7	10.0
College graduate	28.3	16.2	12.1
Family income			
Less than $10,000	25.3	25.4	-.1
$10,000 to $14,999	14.4	14.4	0
$15,000 to $24,999	23.7	23.7	0
$25,000 and over	36.6	36.5	.1
Place of residence			
Large metropolitan city	18.7	12.5	6.2
Medium or small city	41.0	44.1	-3.1
Town, village, or in the country	33.7	41.9	-8.2
Farm or ranch	6.5	2.5	4.0
	(N = 3,232)		

city (50,000 to 500,000), (c) small city (10,000 to 50,000), (d) town or village (under 10,000), (e) in country but not on a farm, and (f) farm or ranch. For this analysis, categories b and c are combined into a category labeled "small city" and categories d and e are combined into a "town/rural" category.

Study Results

We organized study results into three major sections: general attitudes about farming and farmers, respondents' attitudes toward aspects of the structure of agriculture, and attitudes about government involvement in agriculture. Each section includes the response distribution for the entire sample

as well as a breakdown of mean agreement and analysis of variance by residential area. For the response distribution for the entire sample, "agree" and "strongly agree" were collapsed into one "agree" category. To facilitate inspection of differences in response across residential contexts, we used a numerical rating. "Strongly agree" was coded as 100; "agree" as 75, "undecided" as 50; "disagree" as 25, and "strongly disagree" as 0. A "mean" agreement for each survey item was calculated for each residential category. An analysis of variance was also performed, with the reported F-ratios indicating whether differences in mean agreement were statistically significant.

General Attitudes about Agriculture

Table 2 presents the response distribution of the entire sample for questions pertaining to agrarian beliefs and other general attitudes about agriculture. Respondents exhibited widespread agreement with the primacy of agriculture (items 1 and 3), but were undecided about or disagreed with the idea that farming is a more satisfying occupation than other lines of work. The widespread support for the causal link between an agricultural depression and a general depression (item 3) was interesting in light of the seemingly contradictory economic conditions that now exist.

Few respondents (16.5 percent) believed that farmers complain too much about their problems, and a sizeable majority (70.2 percent) believed that most farmers are in financial trouble. Strictly speaking, the perception that most farmers are in financial trouble is somewhat at odds with recent reports estimating that 25 percent to 30 percent of farmers actually are in danger of insolvency. Certainly, a larger proportion are experiencing some difficulty. Only 29.5 percent of the respondents felt that farmers receive reasonable profits for their products. Finally, most respondents accurately perceived that middlemen receive most of the consumer's food dollar.

In table 3 the responses to the items in table 2 are broken down by residential categories. Items 1 and 3 reflected the strongest differences found in this study. In each case the data showed a monotonic relationship between the size of place of residence and intensity of adherence to agrarian beliefs.

Farm residents were more inclined than nonfarm residents to believe that most farmers are in financial trouble and that most agricultural profits accrue to middlemen. Similarily, farmers were less inclined than others to believe that they make reasonable profits. Interestingly, in light of their negative perceptions about their own financial situation, farmers were some-

Table 2. General beliefs about agriculture, national sample, 1986.

Item	Response (percent)			No Answer (Number)
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	
Agriculture is the most basic occupation of our society, and almost all other occupations depend on it	78.3	12.0	9.7	(55)
Farming involves understanding and working with nature; therefore, it is a much more satisfying occupation than others	52.7	23.6	23.8	(62)
A depression in agriculture is likely to cause a depression in the entire country	73.2	16.1	10.7	(69)
Farmers complain too much about their problems	16.5	19.8	63.7	(38)
Most of the time, farmers make reasonable profits when they sell their products	29.5	23.4	47.1	(28)
Today, most farmers are in financial trouble	70.2	14.7	15.1	(36)
Most profits in the food business go to processors and distributors, not to farmers	89.3	6.5	4.2	(32)

N = 3,232

what more likely to support the idea that they complain too much about their problems.

Farm Size and Structure

Table 4 presents the distribution of responses for items pertaining to farm size and structure. Respondents were largely supportive of the concept of the family farm (items 1 and 3), but only 40 percent would pay higher food prices to support the family farm structure. More than 50 percent of respondents believed that laws should limit the ownership of farmland by corporations (item 7), but few (17.8 percent) believed that laws should limit the ownership of farmland by individuals (item 4). Fewer than 20 percent of respondents believe that most farms today are too large,

indicating that there is less public concern about the size of farms than with their structure. Finally, a majority of respondents (54.8 percent) believed that farmland should be owned by the person who operates it. Again, this points to a distrust of "corporate farming" and support for the independent, land-owning farmer.

Table 5 presents items pertaining to farm size and structure by residential category. Some major differences in response patterns occurred between farm and nonfarm residents. Farmers tended to be more supportive of the family farm and more inclined to favor laws limiting landownership by corporations. They also were more inclined than nonfarm residents

Table 3. General beliefs about agriculture, analysis of variance.

Item	Mean Agreement*				
	Large City	Small City	Town/ Rural	Farm	F-Ratio
Agriculture is the most basic occupation of our society, and almost all other occupations depend on it	67.6	72.3	75.8	88.4	43.4‡
Farming involves understanding and working with nature; therefore, it is a much more satisfying occupation than others	54.1	57.6	61.7	75.7	37.0‡
A depression in agriculture is likely to cause a depression in the entire country	68.3	69.3	73.5	89.9	18.3‡
Farmers complain too much about their problems	36.8	34.3	36.2	41.6	5.2†
Most of the time, farmers make reasonable profits when they sell their products	47.0	44.2	42.4	37.8	7.5‡
Today, most farmers are in financial trouble	65.6	68.1	67.3	70.0	2.0
Most profits in the food business go to processors and distributors, not to farmers	78.3	79.7	81.8	89.6	17.0‡
(Number)	(620)	(1,222)	(882)	(159)	

*"Strongly agree" = 100; "undecided" = 50; "strongly disagree" = 0.
†$p < .01$.
‡$p < .001$.

Table 4. Beliefs about farm size and structure, national sample, 1986.

Item	Response (percent)			No Answer (Number)
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	
Obtaining greater efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm	25.7	22.2	52.1	(45)
Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices	39.2	27.7	33.1	(70)
The family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage	79.0	10.2	10.8	(24)
We should have laws limiting the amount of farmland one person can own	17.2	14.9	67.9	(49)
Most farms today are too large	19.9	25.8	54.3	(55)
Farmland should be owned by the person who operates it	54.8	18.7	26.5	(30)
We should have laws that limit the ownership of farmland by corporations	52.1	17.1	30.8	(69)

N = 3,232

to favor limiting total landownership by individuals (although, as with the other groups, a majority disagreed with this item). Farmers, who often rent some or all of their land, were less inclined than others to believe that farmland should be owned by the person who operates it. The belief that farmers should own all of the land they operate may be a precept of agrarianism that is unrealistic in current practice.

Farmers and Government

Tables 6 and 7 address attitudes about government involvement in agriculture. General response distributions are reported in table 6, and corresponding analyses by residential categories are presented in table 7.

On the whole, few respondents (17.6 percent) believed that farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits. Fifty percent of respondents disagreed with this statement, and 32 percent were undecided. The free market question (item 2) had a split response, with 34.2 percent agreeing that farmers should compete in a free market without govern-

ment support, 30.0 percent disagreeing, and 35.7 percent undecided. Interestingly, nearly half (49.8 percent) believed that farming should be treated like any other business. The shift in agreement may be caused by respondents' perceptions that other businesses receive government support. Few respondents disagreed with item 5 (large farms get too many benefits), but many (42.8 percent) were undecided.

Fewer than 14 percent of respondents felt that the previous level of government involvement in agriculture was about right; 44 percent were undecided; 42 percent disagreed. One-third of the respondents saw government involvement in agriculture as beneficial to consumers; 28 percent disagreed. Nearly 40 percent were undecided on this issue, perhaps indicating a lack of knowledge about the specifics of farm policy. About 40 percent of respondents thought farmers have been hurt by government programs; 20 percent disagree. Again, a large group was undecided.

Overall, items pertaining to government involvement in agriculture

Table 5. Beliefs about farm size and structure, analysis of variance.

	Mean Agreement*				
Item	*Large City*	*Small City*	*Town/ Rural*	*Farm*	*F-Ratio*
Obtaining greater efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm	45.7	38.2	39.9	32.0	17.2‡
Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices	46.6	54.2	50.5	56.5	14.8‡
The family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage	71.3	77.1	78.2	81.8	12.4‡
We should have laws limiting the amount of farmland one person can own	33.9	34.8	31.5	38.2	4.4†
Most farms today are too large	39.8	39.5	39.0	47.0	5.0†
Farmland should be owned by the person who operates it	63.5	63.5	56.4	53.9	15.3‡
We should have laws that limit the ownership of farmland by corporations	54.0	57.7	57.8	65.9	6.9‡
(Number)	(620)	(1,222)	(882)	(159)	

*"Strongly agree" = 100; "undecided" = 50; "strongly disagree" = 0.
†$p < .01$.
‡$p < .001$.

Table 6. Beliefs about farmers and government, national sample, 1986.

Item	Response (percent)			No Answer (Number)
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	
Farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits	17.6	32.4	50.0	(48)
Farmers should compete in a free market without government support	34.2	35.7	30.0	(52)
The government should treat farms just like other businesses	49.8	18.4	31.8	(44)
Large farms get too many government benefits	41.4	42.8	15.8	(33)
Government involvement in agriculture has been about right	13.3	44.7	42.0	(71)
Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers	32.6	39.4	28.0	(70)
Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers	40.2	39.0	20.8	(68)

N = 3,232

elicited numerous "undecided" responses. This indicates that many citizens may feel uninformed about farm policy and unsure of its effects.

The analysis of variance in table 7 indicated that differences by residential category were much less pronounced for government involvement in agriculture than for the previous topics. The groups diverged most on the item pertaining to the effect of government policy on farmers. More farmers than nonfarmers believed that government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers. Farmers and large-city residents had similar perceptions about the effect of farm policy on consumers, but the small-city and town/rural residents were somewhat less inclined to view farm policy as beneficial to consumers. Finally, farmers were more likely than others to believe that large farms receive too many government benefits.

Conclusions

Agriculture retained some measure of its central standing in the public mind, yet residents of large urban areas differed from other groups in the

population regarding beliefs that differentiate farming from other occupations. Urban respondents were least convinced of the primacy of farming as an occupation and least inclined to view farming as the most desirable occupation. Farmers showed the greatest support for agrarian sentiments, although all groups were inclined to support broad agricultural "ideals."

Family farms appear to continue to serve as an anchor for public thinking about agriculture. As Vogeler (*19*) put it, family farming is a myth that shapes policy preferences and concerns among the nonfarm public. Although the concept of family farming received widespread support, the majority of respondents were not willing to pay higher food prices to support family farms. "Corporate" farming was opposed by the majority of respondents, who may have unrealistic notions about the amount of farmland actually held by large companies (*14*).

Few respondents were satisfied with the record of government interven-

Table 7. Beliefs about farmers and government by place of residence, analysis of variance.

Item	Mean Agreement*				F-Ratio
	Large City	Small City	Town/ Rural	Farm	
Farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits	42.4	40.9	39.6	38.2	2.0
Farmers should compete in a free market without government support	51.8	51.3	50.9	52.4	0.2
The government should treat farms just like other businesses	56.0	53.9	56.2	56.8	1.5
Large farms get too many government benefits	51.3	53.0	50.8	55.9	2.8†
Government involvement in agriculture has been about right	42.4	39.7	40.0	40.6	2.2
Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers	53.5	49.9	47.9	52.1	7.2‡
Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers	52.9	56.3	57.2	65.3	12.6‡
(Number)	(620)	(1,222)	(882)	(159)	

*"Strongly agree" = 100; "undecided" = 50; "strongly disagree" = 0.
†$p < .01$.
‡$p < .001$.

tion in the farm sector. There was substantial indecision about the role of the free market in agriculture and about the effects of farm policy on consumers and producers. The treatment of farmers by the government showed the smallest differences by residential category, although farmers were more inclined than others to believe that government involvement in agriculture is detrimental to farmers.

Although urban and suburban residents showed support of farming and the family farm structure, it is questionable whether they would be willing to sacrifice something else of value (such as low food prices) to support the agricultural sector. Although farming as experienced through interstate highway travel or occasional contact may in itself be a valued environmental amenity, urban and suburban residents may not be willing to see agriculture sustained close to cities if it involves a perceptible cost, such as lost development opportunities, risk of chemical contamination, or a lowered tax base.

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